Fairbury's First Historian

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Thomas A. Beach was born in 1828 in Ohio and died in Fairbury in 1911. He married Amelia Bartlett from Ohio. Mr. Beach became a prominent businessman and banker in Fairbury. In today's dollars, his net worth was about $50 million when he died. Mr. Beach built the "lion house" on East Hickory Street in 1872. Mr. and Mrs. Beach had three children. Sarah Beach died at age fourteen, and Chloe Beach died at age nineteen. Only daughter Ella Beach lived until adulthood.

Ella Beach married Dr. George C. Lewis from Ohio. Dr. Lewis practiced medicine for many years in Fairbury. Dr. Lewis and his wife Ella had one son and two daughters. Son Thomas B. Lewis was born in 1884 and died in 1915. Daughter Amelia Beach Lewis was born in 1886. She married Walter C. Ficklin.

The youngest daughter of Dr. Lewis and his wife Ella was Alma Eloise Lewis. She was born in 1899 in Fairbury. She attended grade school and high school in Fairbury. While she was in high school, she started her fifty-year career in teaching Sunday School at the United Methodist Church in Fairbury.

She graduated from Fairbury Township High School in 1917. She then attended the University of California in Berkley for her first year at college. She then transferred to Northwestern University. She graduated from Northwestern University in 1923. During summer breaks from college, Alma traveled with her parents. Their travels included an ocean voyage to Europe.

Percy C. James Jr. graduated from Fairbury Township High School in 1919. He graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University Law School in 1924. Percy then married Alma Lewis in 1924 in Fairbury. He practiced law for twenty-five years in Fairbury.

Percy and Alma James had four daughters and one son. The daughters were Ella, Olive, Sarah, and Phoebe. Unfortunately, daughter Sarah Beach James died when she was only fifteen months old. Their only son was Percy James III.

Alma Lewis James had a lifelong interest in history. She was one of the charter members of the Livingston County Historical Society. Alma focused her research on Fairbury history from 1857 (when Fairbury was founded) until the year 1900. She thought the advent of the automobile changed life so dramatically after 1900 that she was not interested in studying that era.

Alma also had a lifelong interest in writing. She wrote and published at least seven different books. Her first publication was in 1935 and was titled The Ancestry of Ella Beach Lewis. In 1936, she wrote The Ancestry and Posterity of Obil Beach.

In 1939, Alma and her family moved into the Thomas A. Beach "Lion House" on east Hickory Street. This house was built by Thomas A. Beach, Alma's grandfather.

In 1951, she wrote Boney's Hired Man. In 1952, she wrote Buckle on the Corn Belt. This book was a story about early Fairbury history. In 1954, she compiled Nicks from the Blade, a mixture of past Blade newspaper articles and stories passed to her from her mother and other friends.

In 1967, Alma wrote her most famous book, Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars. To write this book, she used a lot of the material from her 1952 Buckle on the Corn Belt book. At the beginning of this book, Alma cautioned readers that not all the Fairbury tales were documented facts. She recounted that if the readers wanted absolute facts about Fairbury history, they should consult any of the three histories of Livingston County.

In 1878, 1888, and 1909, extensive and well-documented history books were written about Livingston County and Fairbury. These are the three history books that Alma referred to in her 1967 book.

For the title of her 1967 book about Fairbury history, she chose two things unique to Fairbury history. The McDowell brothers were some of the orniest boys to ever live in Fairbury. They developed a new weapon that could knock a boy or man unconscious. One of these new weapons was captured and put on display at the Blade office. It turned out to be a canvas sack, six inches in diameter and twelve inches long. It was stuffed with excelsior and coarse salt. The stuffed canvas sack was tied to a two-foot-long stick. The McDowell brothers would hold the wood handle, swing the stuffed club, and then strike the victim on the back of the head. They often used it on visitors to the town. They also used the stuffed club on Pontiac boys that were trying to date Fairbury girls. The introduction of a hefty fine for possessing a stuffed club ended the use of that weapon. Back in the 1880s, many Fairbury men used bear grease on their hair. When they sat down in the wife's beautiful chair, the back of their head would deposit bear grease onto the chair. To protect their valuable chairs, the wife would place a piece of cloth put over the back of a chair to protect it from the grease. This cloth could be easily washed. This protective cloth is called an antimacassar.

Alma had to perform a lot of historical research in the 1950s and 1960s to write her most famous book, Stuffed Clubs & Antimaccassars. There were no computers available in that era to perform this type of research. Alma is to be commended for dedicating the extraordinary time and patience required to create this book documenting Fairbury's early history.

In 1977, Alma released the second edition of Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars. The second edition is similar to the first edition, with one exception. In the first edition, she dedicated a whole chapter to William T. Stackpole. He was one of Fairbury's most interesting early citizens. For unknown reasons, she eliminated the Stackpole chapter in the second edition. Alma only mentions Stackpole briefly in the second edition.

The Dominy Memorial Library has copies of Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars. New copies of the second edition of Stuffed Clubs & Antimaccassars can be purchased from the Fairbury Echoes Museum. This book is an entertaining read and provides a glimpse into what life was really like in early Fairbury.

Alma Lewis James